THE RETURN OF BILTMORE OSWALD

In case you thought Popeye was the first cartoon sailor, let me introduce you to Biltmore Oswald. He appears in two collections, both reprinted from **THE BROADSIDE: A JOURNAL FOR THE NAVAL RESERVE FORCE**. The first was printed in 1918 as **BILTMORE OSWALD: THE DIARY OF A HAPLESS RECRUIT**. The sequel, **OUT O' LUCK: BILTMORE OSWALD VERY MUCH AT SEA,** followed in 1919. The cartoonist who did the 64 illustrations that appear in these books was Richard "Dick" Dorgan, a member of the bulbnose and bigfoot school of cartooning that dominated the teens. Oswald was the precedent to Sergeant George Baker's *SAD SACK* and Mort Walker's *BEETLE BAILEY*, the original master of ineptitude, the guy who had two left feet and couldn't get anything right. He dropped his gun on the parade ground and he dropped his seabag on the way up the gangplank to his first sea-going billet. If it could be done wrong, Oswald would find a way to do it.

BILTMORE OSWALD and **OUT O' LUCK** are written in the form of illustrated diaries. In the former, Oswald goes through boot training at a camp located in Pelham, New Jersey. The time is 1917 and the occasion is World War 1, the "war to end all wars". It was a time when jazz was beginning to be popular in New York, when cars were becoming more plentiful and private, and when young women were starting to burst out of their Victorian restraints. It was an exciting time, not one to spend marching around to the tunes of John Philip Sousa. Oswald misses his mother, but he misses his "sweetie", Polly, a bit more. His main pal is a stray dog named Mr. Fogerty, and, yes, you ex-sailors out there, a boot was allowed to have a dog in camp in those easy-going days. Surprisingly, or just because they needed the bodies, Oswald makes it through boot camp and in OUT O' LUCK he goes to sea where he proceeds to make a record for seasickness, spending a lot of his time at the rail. He has a better time in France than some of his buddies, because he remembers some of his school French, but his days are still hectic. Seeing French men kiss one another in greeting shocks the American guys and This variation in social manners leads to more than one comedy

"THE DEPARTURE WAS MOIST"—*Page 6*

"I TOOK HIM AROUND AND INTRODUCED HIM TO THE REST OF THE DOGS AND SEVERAL OF THE BETTER SORT OF GOATS"—*Page 50*

scene in **OUT O' LUCK**.

Nowhere is the class structure more visible, impenetrable, and absolute as it is in the military. Oswald and his enlisted mates spend much of their time avoiding or worrying about the officers who have power over them. The immediate threat is the Company Chief Petty Officer, followed by the Jimmy-legs or Master at Arms, who is like an overseer on a plantation, the hardnose who makes sure everyone is working and obeying the rules. Unlike Popeye, Oswald has to deal with the reality of being a sailor. Eating spinach is not going to get him out of any jams. Since Popeye wore a uniform, we have to assume that he was in the regular Navy, but Elsie Crisler Segar chose to focus on Popeye's off base adventures rather than on his Navy life. Without the uniform, we might assume Popeye was an ex-sailor, but Segar didn't want it that way. It is certainly more than likely that he was aware of **BILTMORE OSWALD**, though he chose to reverse the character completely by turning Popeye into the first super man. Oswald is a kind-hearted, loving little character, always worrying about the welfare of animals, and it bothers him a great deal when a cow is accidentally killed during a duel he has to fight with the husband of a woman who catches Os in his wife's bedroom. Hey, Os was only taking a shower. There was no shower in his room. Popeye can invade the territory of an octopus, smack the creature out of the way and think nothing of it. Oswald isn't like that. Both Oswald and Popeye are chased by women though. They have that in common. One day a married woman picks Oswald up outside the base where he is waiting for a ride into the city. She takes him to a bar and comes on strong. While he knows all the men around envy him for having that beautiful woman leaning on his arm, all Os thinks about is getting away. After all, he's a good guy. He loves his sweetie, Polly, just like Popeye loves Olive Oyl, and he's not going to be unfaithful to her with someone else's wife. In spite of all that booze and jazz, the heart of a proper Edwardian gentleman beats in the breast of Oswald. Suddenly, he notices a man at another table, a man who is staring at him intently, a man who is giving him the meanest look he has ever experienced. Even before his escort announces the

fact, we know this is her husband, and our sailor Os is in it up to his neck. Keystone comedy stuff, sure. But a lot of fun nevertheless. Oswald is always the innocent victim. Like Alice, he just walks around the wonderland of New York and things happen to him and he deals with them as best he can. Popeye is never really the innocent. He is a seasoned old salt from the day the Oyls meet him and take him along to the island where they expect to find some treasure. Popeye knows when he is being hustled for hamburger money and sometimes he lets it slide, but at others he lets J. Wellington Wimpy have it. Os wearily accepts those maternal visits to the camp during which his doting mother checks to see if his underwear is clean just as he accepts the loud criticism of the Jimmy-legs when he is out of step on the parade ground. In situations where Popeye would punch his way out, Oswald escapes through his wit.

BILTMORE OSWALD and **OUT O' LUCK** were published in New York by the Frederick A. Stokes Company. The books were not reprinted and they are only available today in private collections. They ought to come out in new editions for three specific reasons: 1) they read well and contain an historical account of an important period in American history, complete with an excellent description of Armistice Day in Times Square in New York City in 1917; and 2) the character of Biltmore Oswald is an obvious precedent to Popeye, Sad Sack, and Beetle Bailey and deserves a place in the history of comic art in America, but, mainly 3) that hapless sailor, Biltmore Oswald, was the alter ego of James Thorne Smith, Jr., the man who would in 1926, create Topper.

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COMIX PLUGOLA

ALIEN FIRE ends with issue 3. Too bad. This is an interesting comic book with superlative art. It should be an album.* TITS 'N' CLITS 7 and WEIRDO 21 out for Christmas from Last Gasp.* THE PUMA BLUES and CEREBUS (now at 105) continue from Aardvark-Vanaheim.* GRENDEL is in a new cycle from Comico.* FAN'TOONS 19 is $1.64 pp from Edd Vick, 5014 Roosevelt Way, NE, Seattle, WA 98105. 19 is a Funny Food issue.* SHAMAN 49 is 50¢/st from William Dockery, 3226-A River Avenue, Columbus, GA 31904.* POSTE MOCKS 1 is $1 from TKA KOMIKS, 3021 N Southport, Chicago, IL 60657.* PUSSYFOOTIN' 2 features pin-up drawings by Bob Sheridan and Robert Vaughn. 10922 Fortune Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44111, 8 1/2 x 11. $1.39 PP.* THE AMUSING CYNICMAN is Kenny Moran's parody of Matt Feazell's popular stick figure, Cynicalman. $1 from 244 Balmoral, Wpg, Man, Canada R3C 1X6. Kenny also has two more issues of THE WORLD OF ELZON for $1 each.* EL VIBORA 92 is $7 from J. M. Berengueur, Plaza Beatas 3, Barcelona, Spain. The EL VIBORA PASSION SPECIAL is $7. Some of these comics are for adults only, so you should send an age statement with your first order. MAD MAGAZINE did THE UNWATCHABLES in #276. What? You've stopped reading MAD? Not me. Hey, don't miss Neal Adams' TOYBOY. This is what a comic ought to be, though I finally got around to reading all those WATCHMEN and I was favorably impressed with both the story and the cinematic techniques used in the telling.* What happens in Wilmington, Delaware? Well, Tom Watkins will send you his X-RAY free, but you should send him 75¢ for the postage.* I see that the poorest one-tenth of the population (most of us) will pay 20 per cent more of their earnings in Federal taxes next year and the richest (a handful of them) will pay 20 per cent less (CHRONICLE, NOV., 11, 1987, P. A-21). Well, that figures. Reagan misinterpreted Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and thought it meant War on the Poor.* The new address for THE DIRECTORY OF ALTERNATIVE COMIC BOOKS is Jay Kennedy, 877 Norgate Drive, Ridgewood, N J, 07450.* BABYFAT 60 is coming.* -CLAY GEERDES

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